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## INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNISTS DEBATE MILITARY STRATEGY

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
25 August 1966

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM\*

The Vietnamese Communists Debate Military Strategy

Summary

Several recent articles in the North Vietnamese press have provided a clearer insight into the dimensions of a debate among some of the top-level North Vietnamese leaders over basic military strategy in South Vietnam. The debate ~~does not appear to~~ involves the question of ~~whether to fight or to quit,~~ but rather of how best to defeat the US in the military sphere. Openly on one side of the argument is politburo member Nguyen Chi Thanh, who probably has been in the South directing the war. The chief protagonist of the other side may be Vo Nguyen Giap, Hanoi's long-time and respected minister of defense.

The debate apparently started in mid-1965 when the big buildup in US combat forces started to hurt the Communists. It appears that some of the Hanoi leaders, probably including Giap, questioned whether the insurgent forces were capable of taking the offensive at that time with persistent, large-scale, and lengthy attacks on US combat forces. They apparently suggested a shift to a basically defensive strategy that would emphasize the raiding and ambush tactics of the guerrilla in an effort to hold position while shielding the regular Communist units from heavy casualties. During the holding operation the Communists would lay long-range plans for counter-  
ing the US buildup.

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A decision was apparently made, nevertheless, to proceed in basically the same operational military style used before the US buildup began. The failure of the Communist forces to regain the initiative during the dry season, however, probably brought on an extended policy review session in Hanoi in the spring of 1966, at which time the debate was probably renewed.

The recent articles suggest that the question of basic tactics for the forthcoming dry season (November 1966 to May 1967) is still to be decided. Meanwhile, the Communists are conducting the war in the South largely as they always have: drawing on the book for basic strategy, but making the actual defensive and offensive moves contingent mainly on local conditions at the time.

The Polemic Articles

1. In recent weeks, the dimensions of a debate among some of the top-level Vietnamese Communist leaders over how the war in South Vietnam should be fought has come into sharper focus. New insights into this debate have come largely from the analysis of several authoritative articles published in the North Vietnamese press in July, two of which bluntly discussed the "erroneous" attitudes toward the war apparently held by certain unnamed party chieftains.

2. One of the articles was openly authored by a North Vietnamese politburo member, General of the Army Nguyen Chi Thanh. Thanh dropped out of sight in late 1964 and has been ~~reported by several captured Viet Cong~~ <sup>to be</sup> in South Vietnam. Presumably ~~he has been~~ <sup>he is</sup> directing the Communist war effort ~~there~~ <sup>in South Vietnam</sup>. Judging from the tenor of this article, he ~~and~~ <sup>is</sup> felt called upon to defend his stewardship. Another of the July articles was written under the pseudonym of "Truong Son" (the long mountain range). ~~Truong Son is reported to be Brigadier General Tran Do, who is deputy chief of the political office for the Communist military forces in South Vietnam.~~ <sup>whose identity is unknown but who is part of the group of Thanh's top lieutenants.</sup>

3. Both of these articles imply that the debate over strategy began in mid-1965 when the buildup of US combat forces in South Vietnam began to reach significant proportions and the effect was felt on the battlefield. Just before this, both argue, the Communist forces had achieved strategic superiority over the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) following the series of military defeats inflicted on it both in the highlands and in the area around Saigon. Truong Son pointed out that by mid-1965 the Communist forces for the first time had managed close coordination of their offensive actions both in the highlands and in the delta. The result was to put such a strain upon the ARVN's manpower that its tactical reserve was virtually exhausted, leaving Saigon's forces at their lowest ebb of the war in terms of offensive as well as defensive capability.

4. It was at this point that the US began its rapid buildup of combat forces in South Vietnam, which by August 1965 had blunted the Communist drive. Thanh and Truong Son imply that, faced with the US buildup, some Vietnamese Communist leaders questioned whether the Communist forces were still capable of taking the offensive with persistent, large-scale, and lengthy attacks on US combat forces. These leaders apparently suggested a shift to a basically defensive strategy that would mainly emphasize the raiding and ambush tactics of the guerrilla in an effort to hold position while shielding the regular Communist units from heavy casualties. This holding action would give the Communists a chance to assess the situation and lay long-range plans. It is possible that the defensive advocates were motivated in part by a concern over the time required for the North Vietnamese to form, train, and send North Vietnamese units south.

5. These advocates of a defensive stance, it must be emphasized, were dealing in the realm of very basic military strategy and, while the dispute doubtless had a real military and political meaning to the Communist leadership, the course of the fighting in the South might not have been drastically affected, regardless of the basic decision taken. The Communists have always been very pragmatic in their military tactics and actions, tending to judge each battlefield situation by the conditions prevailing at the time, and it is probable that an over-all shift to the defensive would not have resulted in a discernible change in many individual battle actions, at least over the short term. The Communists would have continued to move, on a large scale or in guerrilla-like thrusts, as the immediate situation dictated.

6. Moreover, it appears from the statements of Nguyen Chi Thanh and Truong Son that a decision was made in mid-1965 to proceed in basically the same operational military style used before the US buildup began, i.e., large-scale and sustained offensive actions. Thanh's main argument in support of such a decision was apparently that the Communist forces in South Vietnam, bolstered by the North Vietnamese troops in the South, could hold their own in battle during the November 1965 - May 1966 "dry season."

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Spring Policy Meeting

7. The failure of the Communist forces to regain the initiative during the dry season, however, appears to have occasioned an extended policy review session in Hanoi some time in late April or May 1966. Most of the North Vietnamese leaders were absent from view during this period, as has often been the case during past high-level meetings. Furthermore, during May and June no significant articles on the war appeared in the Vietnamese Communist press, in contrast to the spurt of such articles that began appearing in July.

8. Judging from the tenor of the remarks of Thanh and Truong Son, considerable opposition was voiced at the April-May meeting to the way the war was being fought, particularly during the dry season. Thanh and Truong Son went to great lengths in asserting that the Communists had, in fact, won significant victories during that period. They made little effort, however, to prove their assertions, and instead took the offensive against their opponents, who are almost certainly top-level military planners. Truong Son accused the opponents of the all-out offensive strategy of "trembling" before the material and technical power of the US. He implied that some Vietnamese Communist planners had overestimated the US and "would have made blunders when making strategic decisions during the dry season."

9. Both Thanh and Truong Son criticized their opponents for substituting "book knowledge" for experience on the battlefield. "If we evaluate the enemy in an automatic and bookish manner," Truong Son declared, "we cannot find a correct answer to our combat plans." Further, "if we had automatically sought a ready-made formula," or "copied the experiences of foreign countries" without "selecting and analyzing," "we would have failed."

10. Truong Son also declared that "had we retreated to the strategic defensive position, this would have hampered the development of our position and strength and created conditions for the originally strategically weak enemy to grow strong and to launch

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an offensive against us." The enemy "would have been in a far stronger position," said Truong Son, "if we had hesitated, showed a lack of determination to attack, and let the enemy attack first." Instead, "we applied in a versatile and creative way the policy of avoiding places where the enemy was strong," but of still staying on the offensive and continuing to hit "places where he was weak."

#### Giap Involved

11. In view of the basic nature of the strategy shift advocated, and the open debate over it, it is likely that very high-level North Vietnamese policy makers were involved. One individual who advocated a defensive shift may have been North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap and Nguyen Chi Thanh have long been reported to be bitter enemies, and it is possible that Giap has tried to use the failure of the Communists in the dry season to undermine Thanh's position. This would account for Thanh's staunch defense of his record.

12. In his July article, Thanh insisted that it was necessary for a "leader" to base his action on the realities of the present situation and not follow "old-fashioned" concepts and "old customs." He appeared to have in mind the reliance that some North Vietnamese military leaders have placed on lessons learned in the war with France. One of these proponents has been General Giap, who led the Viet Minh armies against the French. At one point in the conflict with France, the Viet Minh pulled back, re-trenched, and adopted more flexible tactics designed to avoid conventional-type battles where the advantages were not almost entirely with the Viet Minh. This change in strategy followed a series of disastrous frontal engagements in the Red River delta in which the French ability to bring artillery and air power to bear from fixed positions had cost the Communists extremely heavy casualties for little or no gain. It seems that Giap may have advocated a similar shift in tactics in this war for somewhat the same reasons.



Prospects

13. Whoever the main protagonists are, it appears that the issue is still under active discussion. Shortly after the appearance of Truong Son's article, the North Vietnamese press presented a commentary on it by Vuong Thua Vu, a DRV military expert who has written a great deal on the war. Vu pointedly endorsed the conclusions contained "in the first part" of Truong Son's article, namely that the Communists, despite the introduction of US combat forces, are still in the "best strategic position ever." However, Vu attempted to look ahead to the "next dry season" from November 1966 to May 1967, noting that Truong Son's discussion had provided a "firm foundation" from which to "ponder over and develop more profoundly" the issues he had raised. In other words, Vu seemed to be saying that the decision on basic tactics for the coming dry season campaign is still to be made and that other views, aside from Truong Son's, should be heard.

14. The Communist military tactics now being used in the South suggest that the defensive advocates in the Vietnamese Communist hierarchy are still very influential. During the present monsoon season, the expected Communist offensives have failed to develop on any major scale. In large part, this appears to have been due to the success of allied spoiling actions in preventing the concentration of Communist forces for big attacks. However, it apparently also reflects a basic caution on the part of the Communists, for they do not appear in many instances to have tried to concentrate their forces for large campaigns, as had been expected.

15. It is probable that basic strategy questions for the coming dry season are still very actively under consideration in Hanoi as the Communists seek some formula that will offset the loss of momentum by their forces during the last 12 months. For this reason, in part, there is doubt over the truth of rumors from varied sources that General Giap's prestige and authority have been seriously shaken and that he is in political eclipse because he has advocated a defensive retrenchment in the South. He has certainly not lost his official position, since he

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has recently appeared in public in exercise of his office.

16. Meanwhile, the war in the South is being conducted largely as the Communists have always conducted it: drawing on the book for basic strategy, but making each defensive and offensive move on the basis of local conditions at the time. Efforts to build up the main forces by heavy infiltration of men and materiel continue at a steady pace, since a large growth in Communist military strength will be needed to counter the US regardless of the strategy used in the fighting.

17. Finally, it is instructive that none of the apparent protagonists in the debate over strategy has anywhere charged or hinted that the other side favored a negotiated settlement of the war. Moreover, other articles, speeches, and private statements on the conflict all continue to take a very hard line. It seems clear, therefore, that the debate within the leadership is over how best to fight the war, rather than over whether to fight or to quit.

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31 August 1966

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** Mr. Lawson A. Moyer, Jr.  
Director, Coordination Staff  
Bureau of Intelligence and Research  
Department of State

**SUBJECT** : Release of Intelligence Memorandum No. 1596/66,  
dated 25 August 1966

**REFERENCE** : INR request of 30 August 1966

1. INR's request from Mr. Bundy to release subject Memorandum to the press is approved subject to the changes as shown in the attachment (see page 1, page 3 and delete paragraph 17 on page 8).

2. It should be understood that no attribution - in any way - should be made to this Agency as the source of the release.

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Chief, Liaison Staff

Attachment: A/S

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25 August 1966

Talking Paper for: "The Vietnamese Communists  
Debate Military Strategy"

This memorandum was originated by OCI to provide background and elaboration on the recent articles in the North Vietnamese press which have suggested a high-level dispute over Communist military strategy in South Vietnam.

The memo concludes that some Vietnamese Communist military leaders apparently favor a generally defensive strategy for Communist main forces in South Vietnam in an effort to cut casualties while the Communists plan long-range strategy to cope with the buildup of US forces.

Other Communist military leaders favor continuation of sustained, large-scale attacks on US forces in an effort to prevent the allies from gaining the strategic initiative.

Top-level North Vietnamese, including General Giap, may be involved in the dispute.

Subcabinet and routine internal dissemination is suggested.

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